

Some concrete steps for journal editorial boards: A commentary on Kidd and Garcia (2022)

First Language
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Abstract

As members of the editorial team at *Language Acquisition*, we read Kidd and Garcia's target article with enthusiasm. In our commentary, we outline some specific ideas for how journals can help to alleviate the issues raised by Kidd and Garcia, some of which are in progress or in place at *Language Acquisition*, and some of which we hope to undertake

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alongside other journals in the field. We focus on concrete steps, acknowledging that systemic changes, too, will be required to ensure that our science reflects the diversity of languages learned.

Keywords

Understudied languages, endangered languages, linguistic diversity, publication, academic journal

The editorial team at *Language Acquisition* strongly and unequivocally supports the intent of Kidd and Garcia's (2022) target article. The article puts words to a sentiment that is widespread, perhaps universal, among those who study the development of child language, irrespective of theoretical intent, or lack thereof. Indeed, so strong is our concurrence that at first, a response hardly seemed necessary. However, upon discussion, we believe we can contribute to the field with the following points of action.

We agree with Kidd and Garcia that the root causes of the absence of representative cross-linguistic research on child language are numerous, and reflect in part a lack of resources invested in research on understudied languages, and in part impediments to disseminating work that has been done. Since academic journals play a critical role in reviewing and publicizing research, we are in a position to help address these impediments and ensure that our science reflects the diversity of languages learned.

As such, we present below proposals for changes to how we, as editors and action editors for the professional journals in our field, might be able to alleviate the challenge faced by authors seeking to publish work on understudied and endangered languages. These are tangible ideas for adoption by journals both in our field and adjacent to our field – some of which are already being put in place at *Language Acquisition*.

1. **Publication Awards.** *Language Acquisition* has established a new award for the best paper that expands the diversity of language acquisition research (see our *Aims and Scope* for more information). The goal of this award is to draw attention to excellent research that may otherwise go unnoticed. It is our intention that doing so will invite connections to related research and provide a model for how to conduct research that promotes diversity.
2. **Translations.** Kidd and Garcia rightly identified a problem among our four journals – that our knowledge is based upon a limited set of languages. But ‘our’ knowledge is limited to English-medium publications. We note that a wealth of knowledge exists in other non-English-based publications around the world. Such knowledge is outside of the view of our Anglo-centric journals, and so soliciting translations of relevant work published in other languages (where copyright considerations allow) would serve to broaden our access to those materials. We leave aside the question of the morality of knowledge counting only if it is written in English, but do note that for future discussions.
3. **Focus on Description and Theory.** Many journals, including *Language Acquisition*, place a premium on theoretical contribution, for good reason.

Nonetheless, we believe that descriptive accounts of understudied languages are also enormously useful as they can contribute unique perspectives on models of language acquisition and theory. With this in mind, we have refined the *Aims and Scope* of the journal to welcome descriptive accounts of understudied languages that lay out the theoretical import of future work in that language. Such submissions would emphasize how future work on a particular language, or linguistic structure within that language, is relevant for addressing important theoretical issues, but need not pursue an in-depth study of those theoretical issues.

4. **Targeted Review Articles.** Each of our four journals could commit to targeted review articles on specific language families or geographic regions, with the aim of filling gaps in our knowledge as well as highlighting research published in languages other than English.
5. **Common Resources for Data Collection.** We can encourage submissions (either through special issues or through language in our *Aims and Scope*) that use standardized formats of data collection targeting understudied languages. The sketch acquisition project cited by Kidd and Garcia (Hellwig et al., 2021) is one such format, as is the developing Tool for Intergenerational Transmission Assessment (TITA) protocol (Deen et al., 2016). The latter is a suite of six tools designed for researchers and community members in the field to investigate the acquisition of understudied languages and to assess the degree of intergenerational transmission. Encouraging the use of such tools may very well spur research on previously unstudied languages.
6. **Assistance with English.** One major impediment for submission to international journals such as *Language Acquisition* is the requirement to publish in academic English. Journals that provide free assistance in English editing (focused on ensuring that argumentation comes through rather than style itself) may well encourage researchers from non-Anglo-traditions to submit to our journals. We are committed to providing such assistance for submissions that we think have merit but may not otherwise receive a fair review at our journal.
7. **Advocacy.** The editorial staff at our four journals constitute a group of scholars with a particular vantage point of the field. We recommend that we approach funding agencies such as the NSF, ESF, and other foundations, and advocate that priority be placed on research that targets the acquisition of understudied languages. Priority may include targeted grant programs, further inclusion of scholars with expertise and interest in the acquisition of understudied languages on review panels and in reviewer pools, and so on. Power lies in our coordinated efforts.

In sum, we appreciate Kidd and Garcia's timely publication, which serves as a useful reminder that we can and must do more to support research on the acquisition of understudied languages. We hope that by sharing our ideas, we encourage others to do the same and to engage in productive discussions as we discover and refine best practices. In doing so, we hope that the field will be able to make headway and to create real change.

Author contribution(s)

Sudha Arunachalam: Conceptualization; Writing – original draft; Writing – review & editing.
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Yi Ting Huang: Conceptualization; Writing – original draft; Writing – review & editing.
Jeffrey Lidz: Conceptualization; Writing – original draft; Writing – review & editing.
Karen Miller: Conceptualization; Writing – original draft; Writing – review & editing.
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